

Four-Day Week

By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON, Nov. 21—The four-day work week—a quiet revolution in American life—could come to pass a decade before its time, hurried along by a sustained fuel shortage.

This does not mean four days' work for five days' pay, which is a labor dream and a management nightmare; it does mean a rearrangement of working hours to give a worker an incentive to produce as much in four days as he now does in five.

Up to now, organized labor has looked askance at dividing the 40-hour work week into four days instead of five, for health and safety reasons. Most businessmen are leery of the four-day week, too: They wonder how customers would react, and what such change would do to their web of relationships with suppliers.

But in fact, most people do not work a regular 40-hour week today—instead, the 40-hour mark is a convenient mark at which to start paying overtime rates. In reality, the 37½-hour week is here already; the next step could be to a 36-hour week made up of four nine-hour days.

Such a rearrangement would please most workers, and experiments have shown it possible to maintain or improve productivity in a four-day week. The idea is not to abolish Friday as a business day, but to stagger weekends: some people off Fridays, others off Mondays.

In terms of conserving energy, there is not much doubt about the impact of a 20 per cent reduction in the fuel Americans now expend in getting to work, especially if coupled with Sunday driving restrictions.

Moreover, traffic pressure would be reduced as the "weekend" would mean

different days to different families, and most gasoline is wasted by cars stuck in traffic jams at weekend rush.

The four-day week has an appeal to the social scientist and the conservationist, but does it make business sense? Former Assistant Secretary of Labor Jerome M. Rosow, now a long-range planner for Exxon, thinks it could—if approached on a community-wide, or government-wide basis.

The enormity of such a change in work habits on American life is only beginning to be considered. For example:

1. More time would be available for consumption, which would mean increased spending on leisure activities, from recreation to study to staring dully at the television set. More consumer spending is what powers the economic engine.

2. Moonlighting would be transformed, as the second job at night would be discouraged by the longer work day. But some ambitious workers would seize upon the extra free day to extend their income or open up a new career.

3. Working women, now 40 per cent of the work force and the fastest-growing segment of the new entries into the labor market, would be encouraged by the extra day off, since the four-day week would permit more time to shop, housekeep and spend with children.

4. The break-up of the five-day pattern would probably lead to "flex-time," an experiment meeting with some success in Europe that permits a worker to choose what time he wishes to work, provided he is on the

job between 10 A.M. and 3 P.M., and his total time adds up to a full day.

Production engineers, union leaders and politicians used to consider all this to be blue-sky stuff, but work time—which has trended downward by a half per cent a year throughout this century—can be arranged to meet the combined conservation and productivity needs of the economy.

Daring? Imaginative? Scary? You bet. No movement resists movement like the labor movement, and some businesses will find the switch unproductive. The whole idea deserves debate and much more analysis. The real question, however, is not "if" but "when" and "how"—which is why Labor Department officials and some White House aides are thumbing through a paperback titled "Four Days, Forty Hours" by Riva Poor.

For the Federal Government is considered the "model employer": If the 2.5 million Federal employees were to go to a four-day week, they would soon be followed by 15 million state and local employees, and then the rush would be on. (This will not happen tomorrow, but never underestimate the willingness of an embattled Administration to punt and pray.)

Americans are cautious about speeding up trends in an economy now laying golden eggs, but conservatives especially—rightly concerned about the loss of personal freedom that energy rationing would bring about—are wondering if in the four-day week there is an answer that adds to, rather than subtracts from the sum of individual liberty in our society.

The four-day week, inexorable in the future, is worth a close look today. I can hear it now: "Thank God it's Thursday!"